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ABSTRACT

Both the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" by William Carlos Williams and the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights show the power of language as vehicles for message. Using them in class as exercises to look at language and meaning will help students understand the importance of connotation and grammar; the use and validity of sources; and the layers of meaning possible with a few precise words. By looking closely at either in a discussion, students see and model the critical thinking process. Both are short, and each are "do-able" in a 50-minute class. The poem can be used in writing and literature classes to show: importance of language; power of imagery; multiple meanings; essence of poetry; and history of the poem and its writer. The First Amendment can be used in writing, journalism, and media and society classes to show: importance of language and meaning of individual words; possible interpretations of the First Amendment; importance of grammar and why having a free press tied to the people and free speech is importance; sources and accuracy; how to judge validity of sources; and use of citations. Either exercise could also be used in sociology, philosophy, anthropology, basic college skills, or history classes. This paper delineates a 6-step process for using "The Red Wheelbarrow" in class and a 5-step process for using the First Amendment. The paper also discusses additional ways to use the materials and suggests several exercises. (NKA)

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How to Use a Wheelbarrow and the First Amendment.

by Susan Landgraf

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HOW TO USE A WHEELBARROW AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT
BY SUSAN LANDGRAF
PRESENTED AT NISOD IN 2001

Both the poem "The Red Wheelbarrow," by well-known American poet William Carlos Williams, and The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution of the United States dramatically show the power of language as vehicles for message. By using either one as an exercise to look at language and meaning, students understand the importance of connotation and grammar; the use and validity of sources; and the layers of meaning possible with a few precise words. By looking closely at either in a discussion, students see and model the critical thinking process.

Both are short, obviously, so students feel they're more accessible – at least at first glance. Then, as we discuss the meaning of either piece, students begin to express surprise. Though a few remain uninterested, the majority of students in my classes become attentive and interested. Either one is "do-able" in a 50-minute hour of class time, though I've also led discussions that have run almost two hours. I often hear comments such as, "Wow, I never thought a few words could mean so much." Or, "I learned something about language I hadn't realized before." Or, "I guess punctuation is important."

Often the concensus is something like: "I'll never look at language the same way again."

"The Red Wheelbarrow" and the First Amendment can be used effectively in any class for a number of purposes.

I usually use the poem in my writing and literature classes to show:

- the importance of language by studying both the definitive and connotative meanings of words
- power of imagery
- multiple meanings
- the essence of poetry
- history of the poem and its writer

I also used the poem in a workshop to help Great Books leaders in the Northwest understand how to lead a discussion about poetry.

I use The First Amendment in my writing, journalism, and media and society classes to show:

- the importance of language and meaning of individual words
- possible interpretations of the Amendment
- importance of grammar and why having a free press tied to the people and their free speech and assembly is more important than having a free press
- sources and accuracy

- how we judge the validity of sources
- use of citations

Either exercise could be used in a sociology, philosophy, anthropology, College 100 (basic college skills class), or history class as well.

"How to Use a Wheelbarrow and The First Amendment"

THE RED WHEELBARROW

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens

■ William Carlos Williams

1. I give students the poem as one sentence and ask them to make line and stanza breaks where they think appropriate. They report out in class as to why they made the choices they made.

2. Once we've talked about line and stanza breaks, I give them the poem in its correct form or ask students to look it up in the library (also a good library hunting exercise) and make notes about their initial reactions to the poem:
    - Like/dislike and why
    - The "picture(s)" or images they see
    - What they think the poem means

3. The day before discussion I have students look up the individual words in the dictionary and type them up to bring to class; or I tell them to bring their dictionaries to class (and give them extra credit if they have their names in the dictionary to show it belongs to them) and do the assignment during class time.

4. If it's a small class, we have an all-class discussion; if not, I have students form small groups and share their findings by reporting out to the entire class (a good way to start students working in small groups).

5. Then we discuss the differences between dictionary definitions. A dictionary is not like every other dictionary. Most students are surprised.

6. Finally, we discuss definitive and connotative definitions, which leads to a more in-depth look at the poem. We also look at grammar, punctuation, structure and form.

Sometimes I begin "The Red Wheelbarrow" exercise/discussion by going around the room asking students to respond, without thinking, to a specific word, such as red or wheel. The point is made regarding connotation: a red rose is different from a red fire engine.

I also have used "The Red Wheelbarrow" to show the difference between the article "a" and "the."

I sometimes bring in the following definitions taken from *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1976 edition, and give it to students to look at before they begin their own dictionary hunt. If I do that, I don't include "barrow" and "water," saving those for the element of surprise as we look at the differences between "wheel," "barrow," and "wheelbarrow" and "rain," "water," and "rainwater" and what those words contribute to the poem's meaning and depth.

Red: of the color red; flushed; glowing; in the color range between a moderate orange and russet or bay; color whose hue resembles that of blood or of the ruby or is that of the long-wave extreme of the visible spectrum

Depend: to be contingent; to exist by virtue of a necessary relation; to be pending or undecided; to place reliance or trust

Upon: on; on the surface: on it; thereafter

Wheel: circle, wheel; a contrivance or apparatus having as its principal part a wheel: as a chiefly medieval instrument of torture designed for mutilating a victim; a rotation or turn usually about an axis or center; a directing or controlling force; the refrain or burden of a song

Barrow: mountain, mound used only in the names of hills in England; a large mound of earth or stones over the remains of the dead; a male hog castrated before sexual maturity; handbarrow; a cart with a shallow box body, two wheels, and shafts for pushing; it: pushcart

Rain: water falling in drops condensed from vapor in the atmosphere; the descent of this water; water that has fallen as rain; a heavy fall of particles or bodies; to pour down; to bestow abundantly

Water: the liquid that descends from clouds as rain, forms streams, lakes, and seas, and is a major constituent of all living matter and that is an odorless, tasteless, very slightly

compressible liquid oxide of hydrogen H2O which appears bluish in thick layers…; a quantity or depth of water adequate for some purpose; to supply with water

Beside: at or to the side; more at by; by the side of; in comparison with; on a par with

White: free from color; of the color of new snow or milk; marked by upright fairness; marked by the wearing of white by the woman as a symbol of purity – wedding; of, relating to, or constituting a musical tone quality characterized by a controlled pure sound, a lack of warmth and color, and a lack of resonance

Chicken: the common domestic fowl, esp. when young; a young woman; coward; the petty details of duty or discipline – slang

"How to Use a Wheelbarrow and The First Amendment"

The First Amendment

This assignment is done in two parts at the beginning of the quarter: One, to find the Amendment; two, to write a paper about what The First Amendment means.

1. First, I ask students to find The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution of the United States. For some, this will be the first time they have read the amendment, and they're surprised at its brevity. This is a good way to have students do some library research.

    - Find the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights for the United States.
    - Type it word for word on a sheet of paper, exactly as it is written, with proper punctuation, capitalization, etc.
    - Cite your source.
    - This is due (due date), and I will give you either a 4.0 or a 0.0. If it's the latter, go look it up again and redo. Be sure to cite the source from which you get the Amendment each time you search for it.

After the initial shock – only a few students usually have the original or correct version – several things happen:

1. Students begin to ask "Why?" "Why did I get a zero?" Within a few minutes or several days, they begin to ask other students, "Did you get it right?" This is a good way to have students begin to communicate with each other and realize they can be resources within the classroom. If they ask for the other student's copy, then they must cite that person as the source.

2. After several days, if students still are not getting a 4.0, I bring in the following examples. This can be done at the beginning to cut down on the amount of time spent on this assignment.

3. We examine their results and/or I hand out the following sheet with examples of how The First Amendment is written (with the sources of course).

The following versions of The First Amendment are all taken from legitimate sources. Which one is the original (the correct) version?

- "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
  From First Amendment, U. S. Constitution in *Mass Media Mass Culture* textbook by Wilson and Wilson

- Article III
  "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
  From www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/freedom/bill/text.html

- "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
  From *The Constitution of the United States of America* with an introduction by David Osterlund and a note in the book, which states: "The punctuation and spelling of the text of the Constitution and Amendments as they appear in this book are consistent with those of the original documents."

- "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."
  www.nara.gov/exhall/charters/billrights/billrights/html (National Archives), which states that the capitalization and punctuation in this version are from the enrolled original of the Joint Resolution of Congress proposing the Bill of Rights, which is on permanent display in the Rotunda of the National Archives Building
  www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/constitution.billofrights.html

4. We discuss sources and their validity next. Sometimes I start off the discussion with the old "let's pass a message on by word-of-mouth and see what we end up with."

5. Then we address the "So what?" questions:

    - Why "Government is capitalized
    - Why freedom of speech, assembly, and the right to petition is linked with the press, which was considered the fourth branch or "watchdog" of the government
    - What is the difference between a comma and a semi-colon and why does it matter?
    - What is the meaning of press?

That discussion then leads into the writing of their paper about what the First Amendment means.

2. Write a two-page paper explaining what the First Amendment means.

    Think critically; find a focus and use evidence to back up whatever you're saying or trying to prove.

    Use at least two other sources (such as your textbook) and cite the sources.

    Do not include the First Amendment itself in this paper, and don't simply rephrase. You'll have typed the Amendment on a separate page, so staple the two together (and don't forget to include the source for the First Amendment).

    This assignment is due (due date) – double spaced with proper heading.

    I will give you feedback on this paper so that you know what I'm expecting from your
    written assignments. You can rewrite it for a higher grade. Be sure to staple this first, critiqued paper that I've critiqued to the rewritten paper.

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